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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 015731

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/19/2015

TAGS: [PK](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: PAKISTAN EARTHQUAKE: AN OPEN DOOR TO KASHMIR?

Classified By: Derived from DSCG 05-01, B

¶1. (C) Summary: During an October 18 press conference, President Musharraf sent out a trial balloon on Kashmir, announcing that Pakistan would allow Kashmiri civilians--including Kashmiri politicians--from across the LOC to come to Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) to meet relatives and assist in reconstruction work. Musharraf also proposed opening mobile and landline communication links between Kashmiris on either side of the border, a move that was matched by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh a few hours later. Musharraf's announcement supporting the free movement of Kashmiris across the border apparently had not been coordinated with the GOP Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Indian counterparts. Musharraf told the press that the idea was a "suggestion" from Pakistan, and that the modalities would have to be worked out. Reaction on both sides of the border appeared positive, leaving open now only the question of when and how. End Summary.

#### A NEW MUSHARRAF PROPOSAL ON KASHMIR

¶2. (U) During a press conference in Muzaffarabad, President Musharraf unveiled a new plan to allow Kashmiris from across the Indian side of the Line of Control (LOC) to enter AJK to "help their brothers in reconstruction work on this side." While categorical that the proposal was only for civilians, Musharraf said he was open to the idea of allowing political leaders from the two sides to meet and interact on reconstruction issues. He also suggested the opening of landline and mobile phone links between Kashmiris on either side of the border, something which has been unavailable for several years.

¶3. (C) Musharraf described his announcement as a "suggestion" and said that the modalities would have to be worked out formally by both sides. A call to Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Director for Kashmir Affairs Miriam Aftab today confirmed that it was an idea developed by Musharraf (or his close aides) and not by the MFA. (Comment: If left to the MFA, there would be no creative thinking on this or any other aspect of the Kashmir issue. End note.) Aftab candidly admitted that she had been cut out of the loop and was unable to answer questions on how or when Musharraf's proposals would be implemented, whether dialogue with the Indian side had begun, or who the key players in the process were.

#### PAKISTANI AND INDIAN REACTION

¶4. (C) Musharraf's announcement received front-page coverage in this morning's Urdu and English language dailies, which continue to be otherwise consumed by earthquake-related news. Newspaper articles covering Musharraf's proposal were upbeat and positive in most Pakistani newspapers; editorial comment will take another day to emerge. Thus far, opposition parties--including the MMA--have remained quiet on the proposal. Militant groups, including the Islamabad-based United Jihad Council, welcomed the move, saying it would strengthen the cause of Kashmiris.

¶5. (C) Press reports indicate that the Indian Government reacted warmly to Musharraf's proposals, portraying them as well in line with what India has long advocated--greater movement across the LOC. India's External Ministry Spokesman Natvej Sarna and former Indian Ambassador to Islamabad G. Parthasarthy were quoted in the Indian Express and Reuters saying that India welcomed the remarks, and that they "vindicated India's advocacy of the need for a soft border." Sarna said he is waiting for word from Pakistan to work out the "practical details" of implementing Musharraf's proposal. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh immediately acted on Musharraf's call for better communication links, ordering the Department of telecommunications to set up four Telecom Facilitation Centers (one each in Srinagar, Jammu, Uri, and Tangdhar). The Indian telecommunications centers are supposed to be operational for two weeks, starting today. Kashmiri groups--including the main separatist alliance in Indian Kashmir--the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) said they welcomed the offer.

#### COMMENT

¶6. (C) Musharraf's proposal is a well-timed attempt to turn public opinion in Kashmir to his side. Given the beating the GOP has taken for reacting too slowly to the crisis and

several media accounts of militant groups being first on the ground, Musharraf's suggestion to reunite divided families and allow freer movement of relief personnel across the LOC is a welcome step. Consistent with Musharraf's usual style, he announced first and has left it to the bureaucrats to work out later. What happens to the proposal sticks remains to be seen; the Pakistani bureaucracy will only move on the proposal if consistent pressure is applied from the top.

CROCKER